Drowsy Driving: The Road to Tragedy

According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), there are six characteristics of fall-asleep crashes:

- The problem occurs during late night, early morning, or mid-afternoon.
- The crash is likely to be serious.
- A single vehicle leaves the roadway.
- The crash occurs on a high-speed road.
- The driver does not attempt to avoid a crash.
- The driver is alone in the vehicle.

In case you need proof of these assertions, consider this mishap that occurred in 2002:

A 22-year-old Navy PO3 was driving back alone to his command at 0530 from spending a long weekend with his girlfriend. Suddenly, his car drifted off the right-hand side of the interstate and hit some warning bumps located on the shoulder. He over-corrected to the left, causing the car to swerve across northbound lanes into a dirt median. While traveling across the median, the car turned sideways, then rolled an unknown number of times before coming to rest on the shoulder of the southbound lanes. The driver suffered open cranial injuries and blunt-force trauma to the head and was pronounced dead at the scene.

There were no witnesses to this tragedy, but bystanders arrived soon afterward, unfastened the victim's seat belts, and removed him

Even the best-rested driver can get drowsy when traveling straight roads with little traffic, especially late at night.

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The mishap investigation revealed the PO3 wasn't wearing any shoes at the time of the crash.

from the vehicle. According to the police, the victim was traveling about 70 mph–the posted speed limit–at the time of the mishap. The toxicology report showed no signs of alcohol or drugs. A mishap investigation, however, revealed the victim had slept only three hours in the 24 hours before the crash. He also wasn't wearing any shoes at the time, which could have affected his control of the vehicle.

The irony in this tragedy is that just five days earlier, the victim's CO had held a safety stand-down for the approaching long weekend. Motor-vehicle safety was the primary topic at that stand-down. The CO told all hands to pull over if they felt fatigued, even if it meant being late to work.

As noted by NHTSA, drowsiness is suspected in approximately 100,000 crashes each year, and 29,000 of those crashes involve fatal injuries. Drowsiness anecdotally is thought to be one of the leading causes of crashes; however, no measurable test exists to quantify levels of sleepiness at a crash site. The NHTSA says the role drowsiness plays in motor-vehicle crashes may be underestimated largely.

Drowsiness, or fatigue, can be caused by various medical sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea, narcolepsy, restless-legs syndrome, and sleepwalking. Fatigue also is a common outcome from insomnia, whether caused by a medical disorder or everyday personal and work stress.

In America's fast-paced society, fatigue due to sleep loss has become an issue of great interest. Extreme fatigue can cause uncontrolled and involuntary shutdown of the brain, causing a person to lapse into sleep at any time, unaware of potential consequences. Motor-vehicle crashes involving fatigue are a powerful example of this fact. Research by NHTSA shows that drivers often are unaware of their deteriorating condition, or, when aware, they often keep driving.

Commercial-vehicle operators, such as truck drivers, typically are thought to contribute the majority of drowsy-driving crashes. In one study, 50 percent of truckers had experienced at least one six-minute period of drowsiness while driving, and they reported an average of less than five hours of sleep each night.

Truck drivers, however, are not the biggest problem. NHTSA reports that 95.9 percent of annual drowsy-driving crashes involve drivers of passenger vehicles. Young drivers, older drivers, shift workers, and people with undiagnosed or untreated sleep disorders, are at greater risk for a fatigue-related crash.

Alcohol also plays a significant part in fatigued driving. Although drowsiness and alcohol are distinct crash causes, NHTSA data show some evidence of overlap. The National Safety Council cites alcohol consumption as the single greatest cause of fatigue, and NHTSA found that drivers had consumed some

alcohol in nearly 20 percent of all sleepiness-related, single-vehicle crashes.

Drivers don't have to be at the legal limit for alcohol to put themselves at risk for a crash. In one New York state study, more than one in three drivers surveyed in drowsy-driving crashes said they had drunk some alcohol. Police-reported, fall-asleep crashes also had a higher proportion of alcohol involvement than other types of crashes in that state.

Danger Signals for Drowsy Drivers

- Your eyes close or go out of focus by themselves.
- You have trouble keeping your head up.
- You can't stop yawning.
- You have wandering, disconnected thoughts.
- You don't remember driving the last few miles.
- You drift between lanes, tailgate or miss traffic signs.
- You keep jerking the car back into the lane.
- You drift off the road and narrowly miss crashing.

Risks for Drowsy-Driving Crashes

These factors have cumulative effects; a combination of them substantially increases crash risk:

- Sleep loss
- Driving patterns, including driving between midnight and 6 a.m.; driving a substantial number of miles each year or a substantial number of hours each day; driving in the mid-afternoon hours, especially for older persons; and driving for longer times without taking a break
- Using sedating medications, especially prescribed anxiolytic hypnotics, tricyclic antidepressants, and some antihistamines
- Untreated or unrecognized sleep disorders, especially sleep apnea syndrome and narcolepsy
- Consumption of alcohol, which interacts with and adds to drowsiness

At Highest Risk for Drowsy Driving

- Young people ages 16 to 29, especially males
- Shift workers, students or others whose sleep is disrupted by working at night or working long or irregular hours
- People with untreated sleep-apnea syndrome and narcolepsy
- People who drive between midnight and 6 a.m.

Some people on the road drink coffee or a cola that has caffeine to stay awake. Others open a window, sing with the radio, or take over-the-counter stimulants. If you find yourself resorting to these tactics, then it's time to pull over and get some sleep—the only true cure for fatigue.

Here's what was left of the PO3's car after it rolled an unknown number of times.

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